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To cite this article: Satnam Virdee & Brendan McGeever (2018) Racism, Crisis, Brexit, Ethnic and Racial Studies, 41:10, 1802-1819, DOI: [10.1080/01419870.2017.1361544](https://doi.org/10.1080/01419870.2017.1361544)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/01419870.2017.1361544>



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Published online: 21 Aug 2017.



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Racism, Crisis, Brexit

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ABSTRACT

This article offers a conjunctural analysis of the financial and political crisis within which Brexit occurred with a specific attentiveness to race and racism. Brexit and its aftermath have been overdetermined by racism, including racist violence. We suggest that the Leave campaign secured its victory by bringing together two contradictory but inter-locking visions. The first comprises an imperial longing to restore Britain's place in the world as *primus inter pares* that occludes any coming to terms with the corrosive legacies of colonial conquest and racist subjugation. The second takes the form of an insular, Powellite narrative of island retreat from a "globalizing" world, one that is no longer recognizably "British". Further, the article argues that an invisible driver of the Brexit vote and its racist aftermath has been a politicization of Englishness. We conclude by outlining some resources of hope that could potentially help to negotiate the current emergency.

ARTICLE HISTORY Received 3 December 2016; Accepted 24 July 2017

KEYWORDS Racism; crisis; Brexit; empire; Englishness; neoliberalism

People are trapped in history, and history is trapped in them. (Baldwin 1984, 119)

Introduction

The neoliberal consensus in Europe, crafted over three decades by conservative and social democratic political parties alike, has been dramatically unsettled amid the most severe financial crisis since the Great Depression of the 1930s. The resultant imposition of austerity has aggravated existing social inequalities between classes (Piketty 2014), producing a marked polarization in politics. And it is the hard right, first and foremost, that has capitalized on these developments. From Sweden to Switzerland, from Belgium to

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Bulgaria, a tide of reactionary populism is sweeping across the European mainland which demands nothing less than a restoration of a mythical golden age of sovereign nation-states defined by cultural and racial homogeneity (Inglehart and Norris 2016).¹

Britain has not been inoculated from this economic and political turbulence, the most striking manifestation of which has been Brexit. On 23 June 2016, Britain voted narrowly to secede from the transnational formation of the EU by 52–48 per cent. This relatively unexpected victory for Brexit led many to go in search of possible explanations. Some claimed it was driven by those same social forces that had voted for the United Kingdom Independence Party (UKIP) at the 2014 European Parliament elections, that is, “the vote for Brexit was delivered by the ‘left behind’ ... pensioners, low skilled and less well educated blue-collar workers and citizens who have been pushed to the margins” (Goodwin and Heath 2016, 13). While exit polls confirmed that around two-thirds of those who voted in social classes D and E chose to leave the EU (Ashcroft 2016), we should also note that the proportion of Leave voters who were of the lowest two social classes was just 24 per cent (Dorling 2016). Leave voters among the elite and middle classes were crucial to the final outcome, with almost three in five votes coming from those in social classes A, B and C1 (Dorling 2016). Additionally, age seems to have been central to the Brexit vote. While 62 per cent of 25–34 year olds chose to Remain, 60 per cent of those aged 65 and over voted to Leave. In sum, it is too simplistic to suggest that Brexit constituted the revolt of the “left behind”; rather, what needs to be understood is how the campaign to Leave managed to successfully cohere a significant cross-class coalition of middle-aged and older men and women.

What often gets elided in discussions of Brexit is the presence of what we might term “internal others” against whom the nation has often defined itself, including, most notably, racialized minorities and migrants (see, for example, Habermas 2016). In this article, we focus on the place of race and racism in the crisis that led to Brexit. We offer a conjunctural analysis informed by four questions. First, what do the social and political circumstances resemble if viewed with a greater attentiveness to questions of race and racism? Second, how did they arise? Third, what social forces are sustaining them? And, fourth, what forces are available that could help alter the currently dominant direction of travel?

We begin by examining the discursive dimensions of the Leave campaign. We show that the campaign’s narrative was underscored by two contradictory but inter-locking visions. The first was a deep nostalgia for empire, but one secured through an occlusion of the underside of the British imperial project: the corrosive legacies of colonialism and racism, past and present. The second was a more insular, Powellite narrative of retreating from a globalizing world that is no longer recognizably “British”. What gave these visions

such traction, we contend, was that they carefully activated long-standing racialized structures of feeling about immigration and national belonging.

Having mapped out the core narratives of the Leave campaign, we then move on to an explanation for why the current crisis in Brexit Britain has been so overdetermined by racism. We focus, in particular, on the politics of Englishness.² As an invisible driver of Brexit, we show how this Englishness is characterized by two inter-related phenomena. The first is a striking confluence between English national feeling and the longing for Empire. The ease with which both nation and empire can sit together, we suggest, is one of the salient but unspoken dimensions of Brexit and its racist aftermath. We locate the second characteristic of contemporary manifestations of Englishness in the structural decline that Britain has undergone during the neoliberal era. Experiences of downward mobility, alongside the persistence of class injuries, we contend, have produced a politics of nationalist resentment. Coming in the wake of a momentous working class defeat, Englishness has been reasserted through a racializing, insular nationalism, and it found its voice in the course of Brexit. Finally, we draw this discussion of racism, crisis and Brexit to a close by outlining some resources of hope that might help us to navigate the current emergency.

Brexit, racism and the erasure of history

The case for Brexit was built around two distinct organizational formations. The first, Vote Leave (henceforth VL) – the official referendum campaign in favour of exiting the EU – was made up in the main of right-wing Conservative leaders such as Boris Johnson, Michael Gove, Liam Fox and Daniel Hannan as well as a sprinkling of Labour MPs including Gisela Stuart, Kate Hoey and Frank Field. Also part of this campaign was the lone UKIP MP, Douglas Carswell. The second, Leave.EU (henceforth L.EU) – the unofficial referendum campaign in favour of exiting the EU – was primarily a UKIP-led project founded by Aaron Banks and Richard Tice and fronted by then UKIP leader Nigel Farage.

A central feature of both campaigns was the emphasis they placed on reinstating the sovereign will of the British people, exemplified in VL's campaign slogan "Let's take back control". What such a deceptively simple demand signalled to the public was the desire of VL advocates to wrest back power from an EU that in the words of Boris Johnson had become "ever more centralizing, interfering and anti-democratic ...". The independence of this country is being seriously compromised. It is this fundamental democratic problem – this erosion of democracy – that brings me into this fight" (Johnson cited in *Conservative Home*, May 9, 2016).

Significantly, this message of regaining democratic control over the affairs of the nation was entwined with a second argument that pointed to the economic and political returns that would arise from detaching Britain from a

trading bloc that was in economic decline. And juxtaposed to the image of EU decline and over-reach was the portrait of an otherwise recovering capitalist world economy that Britain would once again re-join as an independent sovereign state. For VL advocates like Johnson, long-standing ties with kith and kin from the Old Commonwealth of Canada, Australia and New Zealand (as well as the US) along with the renewal of one-to-one trading relationships with India and China – so unforgivably sacrificed by the decision to join the EU in 1973 (Johnson 2016) – could now be re-established. Some, like the historian Linda Colley, were quick to draw the inference that this was nothing less than a vision crafted by, and for, “nostalgics in search of a lost empire” (Colley cited in *The Financial Times*, April 22, 2016). And such nostalgia surfaced in early 2017 following Secretary of State for International Trade Liam Fox’s plans to boost trade links with African Commonwealth countries, which Whitehall officials branded as “Empire 2.0” (cited in *The Times*, March 6, 2017).

Yet clearly, Britain is not going to constitute a new Empire, no matter how much the architects of Brexit may wish they were able to. Instead, the work that empire is doing here is more discrete, and even subliminal. That is to say: Brexit draws on deep reservoirs of imperial longing in the majority population. When Prime Minister Theresa May (2016) gave her first speech following the vote to Leave, she made reference to a “Global Britain” no less than seventeen times. We contend that the allure of this “Global Britain” acquires resonance among large swathes of the Eurosceptic population in part because of its association with Empire 1.0. That is, to speak of a Global Britain is to not only suggest how great Britain can be in the future, but also to invoke warm collective memories of a now lost world where Britain was the global hegemon of the capitalist world economy. It is to remind that population of those glory days of economic, political and cultural superiority, where everything from ships to spoons were marked with a *Made in Britain* stamp.

Given this, one might have expected some sober deliberation and reckoning with the underside of the actual British Empire project of yesteryear from the VL campaigners, perhaps an acknowledgement of the unequal nature of the colonial relationship based on subjugation and legitimized in the name of scientific racism. Or even a coming to terms with the scars – both material and psychic – left on those stigmatized populations over the course of four centuries, and, of course, how this legacy of Empire continues to shape the uneven development of global capitalism in the present, forcing parts of these populations to migrate to western economies as a racialized reserve army of labour (Virdee 2014). However, hardly a single word has been spoken to this effect. Instead, the Brexit campaign and the subsequent Global Britain project are made more alluring precisely through the erasure of the racist underside of the actual Empire project of yesteryear. By effecting an artificial rupture

between Britain's historical past and its possible future, the VL architects circumvent having to confront the corrosive legacy of colonialism legitimized in the name of racism (including how it shapes lives into the present). In doing so, they also make the new project that much more palatable through an evasion of any discussion of its potential underside. Not only does this vision of an independent global Britain occlude racism, it also exhibits an inability to come to terms with the realities of a twenty-first century global capitalism whose epicentre has shifted decisively towards Asia (Arrighi 2009). The VL campaign was in many ways, then, an exemplar episode of postcolonial melancholy (Gilroy 2004) – a narrative crafted by, and for, those who have still not come to terms with the loss of Empire and the resulting decline in global prestige suffered by the British state (see also Ashe 2016).³

Insular nationalism: the Powellite L.EU campaign

If the VL campaign was led by individuals like Boris Johnson who fantasized about re-establishing Britain as a global hegemon (i.e. Britain as the best in the world), many of the key leaders of L.EU articulated a narrative of British nationalism that was more insular and Powellite in tone (i.e. Britain for the British). At the centre of this perspective were concerns around immigration. According to Nigel Farage – the figurehead of L.EU – the EU had done great harm to Britain by facilitating uncontrolled immigration: “Open-door migration has suppressed wages in the unskilled labour market, meant that living standards have failed and that life has become a lot tougher for so many in our country” (Farage cited in *The Express*, June 21, 2016).

This construction of the migrant as economic threat to the domestic working class was married to a second set of representations that understood the migrant as security threat to the British population. This latter construction comprised three distinct elements. First, the terrorist attacks in France and Belgium and the onset of the migration to Europe of displaced Syrians and others escaping war in 2015 and 2016 were purposely linked by Farage to make the argument that the “EU’s open borders make us less safe” (Farage cited in *The Express*, April 22, 2016). This sleight of hand then allowed him to suggest that by getting “our borders back, our democracy back” through exiting the EU we could also restrict the entry of such “undesirables” and make Britain safe again. The second element integral to this construction of migrant as security threat was that leaving the EU would effectively prevent refugees from seeking sanctuary in Britain since it would no longer be party to EU diktat. This argument was made most powerfully in the lead-in to the June 23 vote L.EU’s “Breaking Point” poster, which pictured Middle Eastern refugees queuing at Europe’s borders. The subheading read: “We must break free of the EU and take back control.” This was a message of “island

retreat" (Winter 2016): if Britons voted leave, they could successfully keep such people from entering the country. And third, when recently arrived migrants were alleged to have committed a series of sexual assaults in Germany – a country which accepted almost a million refugees in 2015 – L.EU campaigners contributed to a moral panic that understood refugees as 'sexual predators', reinforcing the message that remaining in the EU would place British women at risk.

Such representations and narratives acquired traction in everyday life because they dovetailed so neatly with long-standing repertoires of negatively evaluated representations accompanying the on-going racialization of the figure of the Muslim (Meer 2012). That is, while many believed the focus of the UKIP-inspired Brexiteer's ire was mainly white Europeans from the mainland undercutting British workers, it was clear to many within that formation itself that breaking with the EU and "taking back control of our borders" also represented an important opportunity to limit the numbers of Muslims entering Britain, Muslims whose culture many of them believed was incompatible with being British. Until the launch of the "Breaking Point" poster, many in the commentariat failed to appreciate the full toxicity of the L.EU campaign theme of controlling immigration, in part because they appeared to take at face value the careful avoidance of the language of race by L.EU advocates. As a result, it sometimes appeared that their suggestion to control borders was simply a pragmatic response to growing economic and political insecurity.

But the central mechanism through which the L.EU campaign succeeded in side-stepping media accusations of racism was by detaching their anti-migrant narrative from the history of immigration to Britain, and particularly its racialized reception. Throughout the course of the twentieth century, from the arrival of Jewish migrants from the Tsarist Empire to the migration of Caribbean and Asian migrants, there has always been a sustained cross-class coalition of social forces opposed to their presence in Britain (Solomos 2003). Ideologically, this opposition was cohered and mobilized through narrations of the nation that effectively made such groups incompatible with membership of the state on the grounds that they were not Christian (in the case of Jews) or not white (in the case of Asians and Caribbeans) (Virdee 2014).

However, Leave campaigners understood – in the way that much of the liberal media did not – that because this history of immigration to Britain had been so thoroughly racialized over time, a reservoir of latent racism could be activated through the production of appropriately coded language about immigration. That is, one could obey the formal rules of post-racial thinking (Lentin 2016) while at the same time signalling to your intended public that the Brexit project was precisely about keeping the nation Christian and white. That is why those regimes of representation that portrayed

migrants as the bearers of alien customs and practices were sufficient to place them beyond the boundary of what it meant to be British. In these neo-racisms, culture takes the place of pseudo-biology, but secures the same intended outcome of generating public support for the permanent exclusion of migrants from membership of the imagined national community.

It is important to remember that these twin and inter-locking racializing visions of Empire and insular nationalism derived their political power by being situated within a broader narrative that postulated the Leave campaigners as the last authentic representatives of the British people. EU migration, said Farage, might benefit those sections of “the establishment” with their “cheaper nannies and chauffeurs, but it isn’t in the best interests of ordinary British workers” (Farage cited in *The Express*, April 22, 2016). According to this vision, to support exit from the EU, to pull up the drawbridge on migration, was actually to be a democrat, a democrat that wished to restore the right of British people to determine their own destiny. This is what was signified by the demand to “take our country back”.

Making sense of Brexit

If confirmation were needed that the case for Brexit was intimately bound up with questions of race, it was to be found in the wave of racist hate unleashed against migrants as well as the long-established black and brown British. Komaromi (2016) found that more than 6,000 racist hate crimes were reported to the National Police Chiefs Council (NPCC) in the four weeks after the referendum result was declared. Incidents ranged from physical assault and property damage to verbal abuse. One individual recalled being referred to as “dirty paki scum” and taunted about how “pakis need to be rounded up and shot”. A Sikh radiographer recounted how a patient asked “shouldn’t you be on a plane back to Pakistan.? We voted you out.” In 51 per cent of the incidents, perpetrators referred specifically to the referendum in their abuse, with the most commonly involved phrases including “Go Home” (seventy-four stories), “Leave” (eighty stories), “fuck off” (forty-five stories). These were followed up by statements such as “we voted you out”, “we’re out of the EU now, we can get rid of your lot”, “when are you going home?”, “shouldn’t you be packing your bags?” And then, in August 2016, six teenage boys were arrested in Harlow, Essex, for a brutal street attack on an eastern European migrant after he was heard speaking Polish in the street. The man subsequently died. What is striking about this wave of racist violence was the way its perpetrators made little attempt to distinguish between black and brown citizens and white European migrants – in their eyes, they were all outsiders.

How could it come to pass that the first formal break from the thirty-year neoliberal consensus in Britain was marbled through with such racism and

violence? How was such a political terrain crafted that saw a majority of the British population vote for Brexit visions that were stained through with a desire to recover former glories associated with Empire, on the one hand, and the promise to pull up the proverbial drawbridge in order to drastically reduce migration on the other?

By disaggregating the vote for Brexit across the four nations, it quickly becomes apparent how uneven support for it was. In particular, support was markedly higher in Wales (52.5 per cent) and England (53.4 per cent) than in Scotland and Northern Ireland, where Remain had majorities of 62 and 55.8 per cent, respectively (BBC 2016). A comprehensive analysis of the place of racism in the Brexit vote across Britain would have to account for the specificities of the relationship between race and nation in each of these four contexts, and such an analysis lies beyond the scope of this paper (though for a brief overview, see McGeever 2015). In the remainder of this article, we want to place particular emphasis on England and the politics of Englishness, and suggest that they form a crucial (though not all-encompassing) insight into what happened on June 23, 2016 and its aftermath. Eighty-seven per cent of Leave votes were cast in England, and as such there is a compelling case to centre the English story in Brexit. Further, 79 per cent of those who identify as “English not British” voted Leave as did 66 per cent of those who identified as “more English than British” (Ashcroft 2016). We contend that the Brexit vote in England cannot be understood without accounting for the invisible driver of Englishness. This particular vision of Englishness, we suggest, is characterized by two inter-related phenomena. First, the ease with which it can sit within a deep-rooted nostalgia for the British imperial project, and second, its articulation of a new politics of resentment underscored by structural decline and class decomposition. Both these arguments require explication.

Englishness: empire, decline and class decomposition

The relationship between race and nation in England is intimately bound up with Empire. The colonization of a quarter of the world fostered a long lasting, expansionist worldview among the ruling elites in Britain. This had its own “blowback” at home through the consolidation of a colonial racism that came to define British politics. Crucially, this racism was further secured through working class incorporation into the imperial nation through the representative structures of the British state, including the Labour Party. Though a British-wide development, this colonial racism had a very specific and deep-rooted impact on the formation of English nationalism and English national identity (Hall 2000; Kumar 2003; MacPhee and Poddar 2007). Englishness was arguably submerged within the British imperial project during the era of expansion in the eighteenth and nineteenth

centuries, so close was their historical association. As Perry Anderson once provocatively put it, the imperial moment “saturated” England in a “matrix it has retained to this day”. The “motifs of Empire” swept across English society, Anderson argued, and “set” its “ideological horizons” (1964, 34–35). The racializing capacities of Englishness were further developed in the moment of decolonization: the arrival of migrants from India and the Caribbean was marked by a re-imagining of the nation in which both England and Britain were defined by a shared cross-class allegiance to whiteness (Knowles 2008; Tyler 2012; Virdee 2014). It was in this vortex that English nationalism derived the dimensions and referents that would define it in the decades to come, and they have come into view in the blowback of Brexit and its racializing consequences.

However, racism in post-Brexit England has its moorings not just in the “aching loss” of Empire (Gilroy 2004, 95), but also the structural decline that Britain has undergone since the late 1970s and the onset of neoliberalism. The politics of Englishness today asserts itself against a backdrop of Britain’s comparatively marginal position in the world economy. Moreover, the defeat of the social movements in the 1980s and the accompanying delegitimizing of socialist politics have left a working class profoundly disaggregated by region, nation and ethnicity. In this sense, it is the transformations of the 1980s rather than the austerity programmes since 2008 that bear heaviest on our present moment (Davies 2016).

Significantly, the period of working class defeat under the Conservatives led by Thatcher was accompanied by the loss of alternative class frames of resistance, including those that re-imagined the working class as multi-ethnic. Although the organizations of the working class and the left more generally have a long history of imbrication in the politics of racism in England, these organizations have, at the same time, provided limited but nevertheless important cultures of solidarity that have in turn played a key role in re-imagining black and brown migrants (and their British-born descendants) as part of the working class (Virdee 2014). Under Conservative rule, the politics of class and the language of solidarity that had underpinned working class politics were significantly weakened. The historic settlement of post-1945 Britain that labour, to a limited degree, was to be protected from capital was reversed (Hall 1987, 17). These defeats in turn profoundly diminished those counter-currents of anti-racist class politics, including those aligned to the politics of blackness (Shukra 1998).

In recent years, therefore, the prospect (and reality) of downward mobility has produced class injuries and collective experiences that have been recast through the politics of *ressentiment* (Ware 2008). Whereas thirty-five years ago labour and anti-racist movements could meaningfully intervene, today the realignment of British politics has (in England, at least) left the terrain wide-open to the right, ranging from the neoliberal mainstream to its far-

right outriders. In this context, decline, though necessarily a multi-ethnic process, is experienced in a racialized frame and is increasingly responded to by some sections of the working class through the politics of resentful English nationalism (Fenton 2012). The realignment of politics to the right has therefore created an environment in which racism can be more readily articulated since it resonates with the cultural and political logic of our time.

This racializing nationalism has borne a particularly defensive character since the 2008 crisis. It is defined not by imperial prowess or superiority, but by a deep sense of loss of prestige; a retreat from the damaging impact of a globalized world that is no longer recognizable, no longer “British”. The decline of empire, then, has not led to the overcoming of the English imperial complex, but its retraction into a defensive exclusionary imaginary: we are under siege, it is time to pull up the drawbridge. As we have identified above, this was one of the defining features in the discursive architecture of the Leave campaign (L.EU). As Hall once put it, “Englishness has always carried a racial signature” (Hall 2000, 109). We are hearing its familiar refrains in these crisis-ridden post-Brexit times.

These new coordinates of Englishness are evident not just in the language of the Leave campaign, but in large-scale survey data that show the extent to which the main drivers of political Englishness are Euroscepticism and concern about “immigration” (Wyn Jones et al. 2013, 22, 26; Jeffery et al. 2016). Indeed, it is the racialized question of “immigration” that is arguably now defining the conversation around Englishness. In the 1980s and 1990s, public concern about “immigration” remained relatively low, with no more than 10 per cent of the population seeing it as a key issue during this period. Since 2000, however, the hardening of attitudes has seen that figure rise dramatically to 30–40 per cent (Duffy and Frere-Smith 2014, 8), such that by 2006 “race and immigration” were recorded as the most important issues facing the country (CRE 2006, 5). The toxicity of the EU Referendum has deepened these trends, and brought us to what we would now define as a state of emergency. Racism has become normalized in both elite political discourse and practice and everyday life, dramatically diminishing the spaces for Britain’s racialized minorities to breathe and live life free from hate.

This is the context in which an emboldened racist nationalist right has emerged. The inter-locking features of racialized nationalism, anti-immigrant sentiment and Euroscepticism – identifiable across the whole of Europe (Condor and Fenton 2012, 386) – have particular resonance in England. The unprecedented electoral breakthrough of UKIP in the 2015 General Election shows that English nationalism now provides a dominant framing for this racism. Although ostensibly a Unionist party, the UKIP project has been predicated on a distinct politicization of Englishness (Hayton 2016). This is reflected not only in the composition of the UKIP vote (more than 90 per cent of the party’s 3.8 million votes in 2015 were cast in England), but in recent attitudinal

studies of those voters, who strongly identify as English rather than British (Wyn Jones et al. 2012, 33; Hayton 2016, 406). In 2015, the party was able to gain traction by tapping into a sedimented racist nationalist populism that has been a feature of the English social formation for a number of decades. Such racism gains traction not simply through the circulation of racist ideas within mainstream political discourse, but because such ideas have been part of the lived habitus of the English social formation for so long. The racialized codes of belonging that have come to shape dominant understandings of Englishness over the past century have always been met with contestation by emergent currents of anti-racism (Virdee 2014; Ashe, Virdee, and Brown 2016), but they continue to assert themselves in the popular imaginary. Unlike the anti-racist left, politicians such as former UKIP leader Nigel Farage have very little work to do: he can parachute into a constituency and let racism do its work, since he is able to draw not just on the “mainstream political consensus”, but on active and long-standing forms of consciousness. Their trace and resonance is to be found in “popular inventories” (Hall 1979, 20), and the racist Right know exactly where to look. And in Brexit Britain, they keep returning for more.

Racism, crisis and the “political mainstream”

The racism of Brexit Britain, however, does not begin and end with UKIP (whose vote has since declined following a hard-right turn by the Conservatives in 2017). Despite elite hand-wringing and moral opprobrium levelled at the racist violence that followed Brexit, it is difficult to make sense of how the racially charged Leave campaigns could have succeeded without also naming Labour and Conservative complicity in manufacturing the social and political conditions for this momentous decision. While Brexit added an accelerant on those conditions and allowed racism to flourish, it did not create them. Instead, they were birthed under the tenure of New Labour. The riots in the Northern English mill towns during the summer of 2001 combined with the rapidly changing geo-political situation in the aftermath of 9/11 and the war in Iraq were formative moments in the consolidation of a new racialized enemy within – “the Muslim” (Kundnani 2007). Significantly, some of the dominant components of this modality of racism draw with increasing regularity on feminist and gay discourses of liberation – suitably de-fanged and shorn of their emancipatory potential. The effect has been to increasingly legitimize claims that “Muslim culture” and the Muslim presence more generally were in some sense incompatible with modern British values of tolerance and diversity. As a result, femonationalist and homonationalist ways of thinking aided the consolidation of a new consensus on race and difference (see, for example, Puar 2007; Farris 2017) in which anti-Muslim racism formed an intrinsic justification for the Labour and subsequently

Conservative elite turn away from multiculturalism, and towards an assimilatory nationalism (Back et al. 2002). Indeed, multiculturalism itself – denoting state recognition of cultural and ethnic diversity within a nation-state – has been alleged to perpetuate feelings of separation and racial division (David Cameron cited in *The Independent*, February 4, 2011).

And then, when the British economy spiralled into depression as part of the global economic collapse of 2008, New Labour remained resolutely committed to the neoliberal settlement and steadfastly refused to budge from stringent austerity. Alongside this, the Labour administration increasingly entwined the continuing and very real pain suffered by its working class constituency (ranging from wage freezes to the cutting back of welfare benefits) to questions of immigration. Then Labour Prime Minister Gordon Brown, for example, proposed reducing the numbers of migrants amid the economic crisis and resulting austerity with his deployment of what was hitherto a slogan of the far-right by promising to train “British workers for British jobs” (Brown cited in *The Telegraph*, June 6, 2007). Unconvinced of New Labour’s fealty to limit immigration, the public turned instead to a Tory-Liberal coalition government which accepted the premise of the Brown argument and promised to reduce migration to the tens of thousands from its current levels of 300,000 per year.

After Brown’s demise in 2010, the then incoming Labour leader Ed Miliband continued the downward spiral of racializing national politics with his attempts to consolidate an anti-migrant working class vote through his embrace of the tenets of Blue Labour. Blue Labour’s intellectual founders such as Maurice Glasman spoke of the “paradoxes of Labour’s tradition” arguing that it needed to “address the crisis of its political philosophy and to recover its historic sense of purpose” by “rebuilding a strong and enduring relationship with the people” (Glasman et al. 2011, 9–11). And this was to be achieved through a re-emphasis on Labour’s socially conservative roots and an approach that emphasized concern for “family, faith, and flag” (Sandbrook cited in *The New Statesmen*, April 7, 2011). While this is certainly one side of the story of the Labour movement, it neglects to mention its more emancipatory underside that helped make Labour more attentive to concerns around race (Virdee 2014) and gender (Moore 2011). Additionally, what Blue Labour supporters fail to recognize is the increasingly multi-ethnic nature of the contemporary English working class and how their rhetoric is likely to only appeal to certain categories of workers, particularly those most concerned about questions of race, immigration and Europe. Such an approach culminated in the course of the 2015 general election campaign, where New Labour had as one of its five election pledges a commitment to control immigration, and had the confidence to sell mugs which invited us to vote for them because of such a pledge (see Bush in *The New Statesman*, March 28, 2015).

However, by then Labour was already lagging in the slipstream of a racia-
lizing narrative defined increasingly by the so-called establishment outriders
of UKIP whose leader Nigel Farage claimed, openly, that “the white working
class was in danger of becoming an underclass” because of immigration
(Farage cited in *The Daily Mail*, April 2, 2014).

Across the political spectrum from New Labour to Conservative, a powerful
narrative has become dominant which understands that the principal losers
from globalization, and particularly migration, were a social category referred
to as the “white working class” (May 2016). And this message has been ampli-
fied over and over again by the right-wing press who deploy this category for
their own instrumental ends, particularly for eroding support for multicultur-
alism (Runnymede Trust 2009). As a result, the white working class – a descrip-
tive and analytic category whose origins lay in social science research – has
over the course of this decade-long crisis been brought to life as a collective
social force in the Thompsonian sense (1991), such that some working class
men and women now understand and make sense of the real economic
pain they suffer through such a racialized frame of white working class victim-
hood (Ware 2008).

This construction of the white working class has led to a number of dele-
terious developments in the field of politics. First, it has helped cohere and
then shift those parts of the working class most enamoured of such an identi-
fication into the camp of the anti-immigrant right, that is, they have come to
invest politically in understanding themselves (i.e. the white working class) as
the main victims of globalization. Second, by juxtaposing the category white
working class to immigrant, such a narrative not only privileged one stratum
of Britain’s working class over the other on the grounds of citizenship, it also
erased those parts of the working class who were black and brown Britons.
And through this sleight of hand, the lived experiences of those whose econ-
omic austerity was overlain by race and gender discrimination were simply
elided (Emejulu and Bassel 2015) and closed off from public scrutiny and
debate. Third, and related, this had the effect of further dividing the multi-
ethnic working class on racial lines, and in doing so submerged those other
explanations for working class pain – the austerity imposed by Labour and
Conservative elites alike. This has helped neuter (but not rule out) the possi-
bility of a united working class challenge to neoliberal rule.

Conclusion

Williams (1989, 118) once remarked that “[t]o be truly radical is to make hope
possible, rather than despair convincing”. Where, then, might we locate the
resources of hope today? Alongside the mapping of the powerful structuring
force of racism within the English working class, Virdee (2014) has recently
drawn our attention to how, throughout the nineteenth and twentieth

centuries, including most recently in the 1970s and 1980s, there were periods of multi-ethnic class solidarity when parts of the English working class collectively suppressed expressions of racism and, on occasion, actively rejected it altogether. However, the current conjuncture is distinguished from that of the 1970s and 1980s by the disappearance of the working class subject as a collective social force accompanied by the hollowing out of a socialist culture, growing class disidentification (Skeggs 1997), and the decline of the labour and anti-racist movements more generally (Virdee 2015). Potential collective agents against racism in Britain today are not easily identifiable, but a tentative portrait of possibilities can nevertheless be sketched.

We write these words in the aftermath of the June 2017 General Election result which saw the Labour Party of Jeremy Corbyn secure 40 per cent of the vote – the highest Labour vote since Tony Blair won office in 1997, and the biggest increase since the Attlee government of 1945. This represents a further unsettling of the neoliberal consensus, but in contradistinction to Brexit, it has been crafted on a left terrain. Labour's manifesto – *For the Many, Not the Few* (2017) – not only set out a vision of opposition to austerity, it also struck a defiantly optimistic tone, of how to do politics differently. What was striking about its discourse was the ways in which it tried to alter the terms of debate by positing collectivism over individualism, of state regulation and intervention in the market, and a more expansive vision of class that encompassed black and brown British working people as well as those defined as white. At the same time, we are cognizant of the limits of Corbynism. Debates around immigration and antisemitism, for example, are far from resolved. Moreover, the re-emergence of this more solidaristic form of politics must combine more thoroughly with those social groups concerned with overcoming the structuring force of racism if they are to avoid the tendency to reduce inequalities arising from racism to those of class.

We believe there are grounds for optimism. Deposited within sections of the black and brown populations of England are memories of collective resistance. From the workplace strikes against discrimination led by the Indian Workers Association to the black struggles against state and street racism (Sivanandan 1982), it was autonomous collective action that helped turn the tide against such sustained exclusion and violence. And just like then, any push back against the exclusionary narrowing of Englishness today will more than likely involve those who directly incur the injuries of racism. The emergence of anti-racist movements including Black Lives Matter UK, Rhodes Must Fall, certain Decolonial initiatives and the formation of refugee support networks hint at the possibility that we may be entering a new period of sustained collective action against racist discrimination, as well as class inequalities.

In a more everyday sense, there is also hope to be found in the very fact of contemporary multi-ethnic life in Britain. We are, to put it simply, much more

entangled in each other's lives than was once the case. For example, nearly one in ten people in England and Wales are involved in so-called mixed relationships, and nearly half of these are with someone from the majority "white" population (ONS 2011). The retreat of collectivism that has come to define the neoliberal era has also been accompanied by the emergence of an everyday multicultural reality, particularly among younger generations. Those who are under thirty-five grew up in the slipstream of the anti-racist struggles of the 1970s and 1980s. They encountered a Britain transformed by the very real gains of the anti-racist movement that preceded them (equality provisions at work, multicultural education in schools, an established anti-racist civic culture and so on). However much of these gains are being rolled back by the austerity programme of recent years, their imprint is traceable in the ease with which many young people handle the lived realities of multi-ethnic life in Britain, especially urban England where the vast majority of Britain's minority populations live. In this sense, the anti-racist victories of the past have their returns in the present, even though the political conjuncture is markedly different.

Gilroy has written confidently about how the "convivial metropolitan cultures of the country's young people" may serve as a "bulwark against the machinations of racial politics" (2004, 131–132). Additionally, in his study of South London, Back found that young whites vacated both whiteness and Englishness on account of the inability of these identifiers to speak to the multi-ethnicity that is forged at the everyday level (1996, 134–138). He also found that young black youths were "preparing the social ground where a reworked aesthetic of Englishness can exist free of racially exclusive terms of reference" (1996, 159). These observations led Back to optimistically predict a future in which racialized Englishness would no longer be tenable and would be rendered "almost meaningless" by such emergent new multi-culture (1996, 250).

Some qualifications, however, need to be registered to these important insights. First, the racialized politics of English nationalism appear to be gaining ground in precisely those areas of England where there are relatively low levels of migration and less evidence of the kind of multiculturalism that Gilroy and Back describe (Dodds 2015). There are questions, then, about the representativeness of London as a case study for anti-racist resources of hope. Second, as a phenomenon that can be traced back to the 1990s, the multicultural sensibility that both Back and Gilroy speak to has not yet been tested, in a political sense. It is not clear then how durable the lived multiculturalism produced in the aftermath of the anti-racism of the 1970s and 1980s will prove to be, particularly in a juncture where the racist right are in the ascendency and the infrastructure of anti-racist resistance appears hollowed out and in long-term retreat.

There are resources of hope, but time is running out – we are at five minutes to midnight.

Notes

1. The cases of Greece, Spain, Portugal and arguably Scotland are in this sense exceptions in an otherwise rightward drift of politics in Europe.
2. The ways in which the crisis has unfolded in Scotland and how this intersects with questions of race and racism will be traced in a forthcoming article by the authors.
3. Such wilful ignorance on the part of the VL campaign not only occluded racism, but another dimension of the Empire story: namely, the wave of decolonial revolt that systematically dismantled the British Empire piece by piece in the name of democracy and freedom, such that between 1945 and 1965 the number of people under British colonial rule fell from 700 million to 5 million (Virdee 2014).

Acknowledgements

We would like to thank the three referees as well as Matt Dawson, David Featherstone, David Feldman, Bridget Fowler, Emma Jackson, Gareth Mulvey and Helge Petersen for their helpful comments on an earlier draft of this article.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

Funding

We are grateful to the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) Centre on Dynamics of Ethnicity [award number ES/K002198/1] for supporting this research.

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